

A recent report by the Associated Press ranked California worst in the nation at providing guidance counselors, with a statewide average of 1,016 students to 1 counselor for the 2010-11 school year compared with a nationwide ratio of 250-to-1.

LAUSD averaged 1 counselor to every 412 students for the 2013-14 school year, District Spokesman Thomas Waldman stated.

The statewide shortage of counselors hits foster children the hardest, as they're mostly likely to bounce from school to school, according to the Associated Press report.

Jenkins said the newly created team has been working to ensure that foster kids are permitted to stay at the same school even if the foster home they're moved to falls outside its boundaries. While foster guardians are still responsible for transportation — a function advocacy groups would like to see provided by LAUSD — social services offers a stipend.

And while LAUSD's placement of foster-youth counselors is still nowhere near the 50-to-1 ratio recommended by the advocacy group Alliance for Children's Rights, a significant drop in the number of foster kids in the district should help ease caseloads.

While it still had the largest concentration of foster children in any California school district last year — 11,604 — LAUSD this year dropped that total by 28.7 percent, to 8,278. Jenkins suspects the decline is a product of the Department of Children and Family Services' push to keep kids in their homes when possible.

added to aid foster children

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LAUSD plan aims to give kids academic stability

By Thomas Himes

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The first phase of efforts to aid foster kids attending California's largest school district is nearly finished, as Los Angeles Unified hires the last few counselors in the inaugural year of a three-year, \$32.7 million plan.

While there were some delays in the district's first mass hiring in recent memory, a newly assembled force of social workers has begun counseling the 8,278 students in foster care, who are statistically more likely to struggle in school.

"The counselors have been successful in helping kids graduate," said LAUSD Foster Youth Achievement Program coordinator La Shona Jenkins, noting the impact of uncertain home situations. "They've been successful in enrolling and increasing school stability."

In the initial year of plans to target disadvantaged students with increased state funding, \$9.9 million will be spent on the pupils in foster care, with a focus on reducing absenteeism and suspensions, improving state test performance and providing psychological services.

Some 55 counselors will be set up at campuses to work with the students, along with 11 supervising social workers and administrative and clerical staff. Additionally, the city of Los Angeles pitched in \$1 million for caseworkers to staff 13 city-run centers in poverty-stricken neighborhoods.

The center-based staff help foster families and students secure mental-health services, medical care and other resources essential to the well-being of foster kids in and out of school, said Erika Torres, LAUSD's Pupil Services director.

"Whatever the needs, they connect them to those resources," she said.

Fight for foster kids is a test for de León

A wave of legislation about to hit the California Legislature on the alarming pattern of over-drugging foster children will require careful navigating.

But it's heartening that lawmakers are anxious to deal with the problems described in heart-breaking detail over the past year by the Los Angeles News Group's sister papers in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Most encouraging is that new state Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León, D-Los Angeles, is on top of this.

Bay Area News Group reporter Karen de Sá's "Drugging Our Kids" series has documented a pattern of using drugs to control behavior rather than to treat disorders for which they're approved. Psychotropic medications often are prescribed in questionable combinations and in far larger dosages than approved for kids under 18.

De Sá's reports documented how doctors legally receive money or gifts from drugmakers for various reasons including travel, speaking engagements and drug trials — and, from 2010 to 2013, prescribers of psych medications in the foster care system received more than twice as much as typical California doctors.

As an earlier editorial said, the implication of preying on the most vulnerable of patients to boost drug sales is hard to discount.

Some opponents of further regulation defend current practices as the best options available. They're wrong. Side effects such as lethargy and massive weight gain can damage kids' lifelong health and their ability to get an education.

Others acknowledge the drugging problem but fear that new laws will be overkill, harming kids in the long run by interfering with swift treatment when serious disorders are diagnosed. That concern is legitimate, and it will be up to law-

pendulum of regulation can't swing to the opposite extreme. It should be brought into balance.

De León's staff has been meeting with reform advocates and with lawmakers working on bills. Sen. Jim Beall, D-San Jose, a longtime advocate for foster children, is among them.

De León's leadership role is to make sure the package that goes to the governor's desk is thoughtful and coherent.

More and improved training is one promising suggestion. Another is empowering public health nurses, whose observations can be undervalued, to flag problems.

Last fall, the Department of Health Care Services added a layer of review when doctors want to prescribe antipsychotic drugs to any child on Medi-Cal.

That led to complaints that treatment has been delayed or denied. Still, it's clear that these drugs have been used as "a chemical restraint," as Sen. David Chiu, D-San Francisco, puts it, for children whose behavior may be rational in light of the trauma that led to their removal from their families. Youths should have a choice of alternative therapy.

Judicial review of doctors' prescriptions of psychotropic drugs shouldn't be necessary, but the Bay Area News Group's reporting has shown that it is. As de León told reporter de Sá in an email: "When the government takes the extraordinary step of removing a child from their families because of abuse or neglect, it assumes the tremendous responsibility of ensuring they are cared for and not further abused or neglected by the system."

Meeting that challenge would be a great accomplishment for the new president pro

Lawsuit

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sify documents for specified applicants so that they could pass the background process and be hired. He refused and the candidates' paperwork was given to other investigators, the suit states.

Nguyen complained to a lieutenant about the sergeant's order, but nothing was done, according to the lawsuit.

Later, a captain asked Nguyen to campaign on behalf of Tanaka, a former undersheriff, the suit states. Nguyen said he was "not interested" and was subsequently demoted to a position doing background checks for prospective civilian members of the department, the suit states.

Two sergeants also gave Nguyen an excessively large caseload and subjected him to unwarranted criticism of his

work, according to the lawsuit.

A captain increased the retaliation after Nguyen complained to then-Sheriff Lee Baca, according to the lawsuit.

"He was not allowed to go beyond the chain of command again with his complaint and she refused to transfer plaintiff out of the hostile workplace," the suit states.

Nguyen also was required to work as a bailiff at various locations six times a month and was given projects that interfered with his ability to do any "meaningful work," according to the lawsuit.

Nguyen found out that he was being internally investigated last year, which he considered more harassment and retaliation, the suit states. He went on medical leave in September because he could no longer tolerate the stress, according to the lawsuit.

Long Beach Police Chief Jim McDonnell defeated the 56-year-old Tanaka in November in a runoff election for sheriff.

L.A. COUNTY Sheriff's Department investigator alleges retaliation

Lawsuit says he refused to falsify documents, campaign for Paul Tanaka

By City News Service

A Los Angeles Sheriff's Department background investigator is suing the department, alleging he was retaliated against and forced to go on medical leave for refusing to falsify documents and to campaign for Gardena Mayor Paul Tanaka's unsuccessful bid to become sheriff.

Ban Nguyen filed the lawsuit in Los Angeles Superior Court on Friday, alleging violations of his civil rights and of the state Labor Code. The suit also names Tanaka as well as two sheriff's captains and two sergeants.

He seeks unspecified damages.

A Sheriff's Department representative did not immediately reply to an email seeking comment.

According to the lawsuit, Nguyen began working with the department in June 1996 and was a background investigator for the personnel bureau when he went on leave in September.

The suit alleges that at the end of 2012 Nguyen was approached several times by a sergeant to falsify documents.

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